Treasured

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by LittleUggie

Summary

While being burned for being a witch, Will is mistaken as a virgin sacrifice by the dragon Hannibal who adds him to his horde.

We Didn't Start the Fire

Will decided as his hands were tied behind the large stake anchored in the ground that, in hindsight, he probably should have left the village quite a while ago.

But he hadn’t foreseen things getting this bad. He’d lived on the outskirts of the small community for ages. The day his father died, Will had loaded up his few scant belongings, and sailed their fishing boat up the river until he was far enough away nothing looked familiar. He’d sold the boat and purchased the little cabin by the water, a good mile or so walk outside the town proper.

He was aware of the whispers that followed him on the few occasions he had to go into town to purchase the supplies he could not forage from the forest. They amused him at first. He was a reclusive stranger, so of course imaginations ran wild. The local children (whose whispers weren’t all that quiet) claimed he was a wizard or sorcerer who called up demons and performed dark magic out in the woods. The adult’s suppositions weren’t much better. He’d heard that he was a criminal hiding from the law, a nobleman banished in disgrace, a soldier who’d abandoned the war. It seems that there was a new story every week. He marveled at how much time people devoted to speculating about him. What was more amusing is that no one ever thought to simply ask him.

The only people he ever spoke to was the man who ran the supply store to barter for goods, and the woman who ran the tavern on the occasions he would stop in to have a drink. In all honesty, his life was fairly mundane. He hunted, fished, gardened, foraged. A few stray dogs attached themselves to him when they discovered he was willing to feed them. He thinks it was the books that caused the most stir.

His father had taught him to read out of a few well cared for books. One of the few things he had told Will about his mother is that she was the one who taught him. Very, very occasionally travelling book merchants would pass through the village and Will would always go and peruse the tombs. He was one of the few in the village who could read and it just added to his mystery in the residents’ eyes.

It didn’t really bother him. He wasn’t a social person by nature so he was content to let the villagers think what they wanted and continued as he always did. Then the dragon showed up.

Will was standing on the bank of the river fishing when the shadow of the massive creature blocked out the sun. It swooped low over the village, and even as far out as he was, Will could hear the screams. He watched as the dragon, sun glinting off black and gold scales gilded with more grace than something that size should have across the band of the river to the cliffs on the far side. There was something bloody clamped in its powerful jaws. The dogs went crazy, barking and howling after it.

Will drops his pole and runs into town, to discover the other village members gathering in crowds in the town center. There was panic and lots of yelling. From what he could gather, the dragon had flown in from the east and had snapped up a sheep grazing in a field on the other side of the village. No one had been hurt, but the presence of a dragon was not something anyone was happy about.

There wasn't a lot to be done about it, though. The mayor sent a message off to the city, requesting aid from the soldiers or adventurers who pass through there, but they couldn't really afford to hire someone to hunt down a dragon. They had to hope that someone would take up the challenge with the hope of getting a portion of the dragon's treasure or simply for the glory. In the meantime, more livestock disappeared and the villagers grew more fearful.

Every time the shadow of the creature passed overhead, everyone would run for cover. Once, a foolishly brave man shot at it with a crossbow. The arrow glanced harmlessly off the dragon's scales, but the man had drawn it's attention. The burst of fire that issued from it's snout not only scorched the man off the face of the earth but set fire to several surrounding buildings.

That is when the thoughts of the villagers turned to the old stories. The ones where dragons did the bidding of evil witches and wizards made deals with demons in exchange for power. Scared humans are a far more dangerous animal than any dragon. Which is how Will came to be dragged out of his home and tied to a pole on the highest nearby hill.

He is not sure why they think setting him on fire will make the dragon go away, but mobs don't tend to run on logic. He's really more mad that they had struck at his dogs when they'd come to his defense. Hopefully they wouldn't go after them once he was gone.

The kindling was being piled up around him now, and torches being lit off of each other. He tests the ropes binding his hands, but just succeeds in hurting his already chafed wrists. He closes his eyes against the sight of the villagers and imagines himself fishing by a placid stream. Instead of shouts and jeers he hears the burbling of gently flowing water. It's the smell he can't quite manage to block out. And the acrid smell of smoke threatens to shake him out of the fantasy. That is until the screams of terror break through.

He opens his eyes, and the day seems to have gone dark. The mob that had been filled with righteous fury was now either cowering or fleeing in panic as the massive form of the dragon bore down on them. Torches had been dropped and lit the dry grass of the area, which was quickly spreading, fanned by the wind from the dragons wings.

The dragon lands in front of Will, impervious to the flames around it. Will looks up past a scaled snout into glowing, *intelligent* red eyes. The dragon tilts its head as if considering Will, then raises a clawed hand. Will braces himself for a hopefully swift death. But it doesn't come. Instead, he stumbles forward as the ropes binding him suddenly give way. Before he can catch his balance, he is gripped securely, but gently, around the middle. Then the ground falls away.

All That Glitters is Gold

Had Will eaten anything that day, he would have lost it at the sudden altitude change he underwent. His ears pop painfully, and wind whips at his face. He'd scream, but his lungs have no air. After an eternity of paralyzing fear, watching the blurred ground beneath him, he feels them begin to descend. They glide surprisingly gracefully down into a clearing inside a circle of rocks. As Will is released from the claws holding him, he immediately falls on his bottom, legs turned to jelly.

The dragon peers at him, and Will swallows hard looking back. His heart pounds so fast he fears it might escape his chest. Instead of striking like a snake, as he half expects, the dragon instead folds its wings back and settles down, tucking its legs beneath itself and wrapping its tail around its body like a large cat.

It tilts its head, and again Will gets a sense of an intelligent mind behind the fearsome appearance. It intently watches Will, and he begins to think that it's waiting to see what he does next.

Since it doesn't look like he's about to be eaten at the moment, he looks around. What he had taken for rocks when they landed were actually the ruins of a castle, overgrown with moss and ivy. The entire area is surrounded by thick swaths of trees, effectively hiding it from the outside world. The entrance of the castle is a wide ornate arch large enough for the dragon to fit through. Whatever doors there had been were gone, either rotted away or broken through long ago. He cannot see much beyond the arch, the inside of the structure shadowed, but he thinks this must be the dragon's lair.

You are different than the others.

The words ring in Will's head. He jumps, scrambling back from the dragon.

"What?" he gasps. The word sounds loud and out of place in the quiet of the ruins.

I've never been offered a male before, but you are quite lovely. The dragon stretches its neck out , bringing its snout close to Will's hair. It breathes in deeply. *And still pure. That's not a requirement as you humans think, but it is a nice addition.*

"How...how can I hear you?" Will asks, because it has to be the dragon talking to him.

Magic. The dragon says simply. *What is your name, lovely boy?*

Lovely? Will's cheeks burn. "Will."

I am Hannibal.

"Why'd you bring me here?"

This is my lair, I keep all my treasures here. You will meet the others soon.

"Others?"

I am no kit, you are not my first treasure, of course .

"I-I'm a treasure?"

The dragon squints at him. *You were an offering from that gathering of humans were you not? I am often offered gifts from human settlements. Not all of them are acceptable, but you caught my eye.*

Will cannot believe the radical turn his life had taken. "You think I'm a sacrifice?"

Weren't you? You looked like one.

“I was being executed.”

The dragon blinks. Will gets the sense he surprised it, though it’s hard to tell on the reptilian face. *Why?*

And now Will has to laugh, the sound tinged with hysteria. “Because they thought I was responsible for the dragon coming to the village.” Oh the irony.

The dragon snorts, smoke blowing from its nostrils. *That is ridiculous. All I did was fly over that settlement.*

“You set someone on fire.” Will points out.

They shot at me first. The dragon said reasonably. *Why would they think you were responsible for my appearance?*

Will shakes his head. “I don’t know. Because they were scared and needed someone to blame?” And now that he’d been carried off by the dragon they would definitely think it was his fault.

You are my treasure now, and well away from those blind, foolish humans. The dragon says dismissively. It stands, stretching. It nudges at Will with its muzzle, causing him to back up several steps. *Come, it’s time to meet the others.*

Hannibal urges Will through the castle’s archway. Inside the gloom is cut through by beams from the high windows. The inside is surprisingly clean. What is left of the castle is mostly a large cylindrical structure, with the main hall they are in taking up the entire first floor. There are two sets of stairs on either side of the room, leading up to a balcony with a long table that overlooked the lower level. He can see that there were doors leading off from the balcony, presumably leading to the upper chambers. In the center of the ceiling, there is a large hole. Will would have thought it was purposefully built into the architecture, except for the scorch marks around the edges. He walks beneath it and looks up. The hole appears to be repeated in

each story, though it doesn't go through the roof. Someone had built railings around the holes in the upper levels.

It becomes obvious what the opening is there for when Hannibal extends his neck, sticking his head through the hole. .

My jewels, we have a new companion. Please, come down. The words still seemed to come from inside Will's head, but there was a reverberation to them now. He could tell that they weren't directed at him even though he could 'hear' them.

From above there came the sound of footsteps on stone, and, to his surprise, a couple of faces look over the rail down at them. They disappear quickly, and more footsteps joining them. Hannibal sits back down, and turns expectantly toward the balcony, so Will does, too.

Several women enter through the balcony doors, and descend the stairs. The look at Will curiously, and he tries not to stare in shock at them.

These are my living treasures , Hannibal says fondly. *Chiyo has been with me the longest* . One of the women with eastern features nods solemnly at him. She is wearing leather breeches and a patchwork overcoat. There is a bow and quiver slung over her shoulder.

Bedelia came to me from a convent , the dragon continued. The eldest of the women, though she was still icily beautiful, stepped forward. She wore a rose colored dress that favored her pale skin and hair.

"Welcome." She says, though her eyes are more assessing than welcoming.

Margot was an offering from the Verger kingdom, and Alana came with her by choice . One of the dark haired beauties offered him a genuinely friendly smile, she was holding hands with another woman who gave him a quiet, "hello." They both wore simple house dresses.

Beverly prefers to tell the tale of how she came to join my collection herself.

“It’s an interesting story!” The other eastern woman winks at him. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to the whole dragon thing soon. You’re a treasure so he’s not going to eat you.” She wears a high waisted dress with a silk robe covering it.

Yes, thank you, Beverly. Hannibal managed to sound put upon. *Abigail, dear, come forward, please.*

A young woman who had been half hiding behind the others creeps forward. Will sees she is not much more than a child. She wears a high necked gown in a dark green, and her hair loose around her face.

I found Abigail quite by accident . There is no reason to be bashful, my pearl. The girl is blushing furiously and darts nervous glances at Will. *She is unused to the presence of men.* He tells Will.

My jewels, this is Will. He is a treasure, and I expect you to welcome him into the fold. Hannibal looks surveys him. *I think a bath and some new clothes first.*

Because You're Mine

Will looks down at the torn and stained breeches and shirt he'd been wearing when the mob came for him. There was some blood on them. He'd been running on terror until that moment. Suddenly all the scrapes and bruises he's received started clamouring for attention. His bare feet were cold on the stone floor, and his raw wrists ached something awful.

He was picked up again around the middle and gently placed on the balcony in front of the women. He couldn't hold back a surprised yelp this time. He gripped the railing behind him, breathing hard.

"Oh, he's hurt, Hannibal!" Either Margot or Alana, he wasn't sure which was which came toward him, concerned.

Not too badly, I hope. Those large eyes inspected him closely. *Would you tend to him, Alana?*

"Of course. Come on, Will, right?" The women circled him curiously now, the one in front of him, held out a hand and smiled sweetly at him.

"Um, yes." Cautiously he took her hand. She tutted as she saw the welts and bruises from where he was bound.

'Didn't go quietly, didja?" Beverly asked. "I don't think I've ever heard of a male virgin sacrifice before."

"That wasn't exactly what happened." He said as he was led to the stairs.

"No reason to be embarrassed." Bedelia said. "No one here will judge you for it."

He blushes, "I mean-"

“This way,” Alana interrupts. “I have some ointments and bandages in the sitting area.”

He’s led to the next story up. There were magnificent tapestries covering the walls and sumptuous rugs spread over the floor. There were no separating walls on this level, instead half was taken up by what Alana referred to as ‘the sitting area’. There was a fireplace surrounded by several comfortable chairs, as well as some large, plush pillows. Several shelves filled with everything from books to wine bottles were set up. A table with a tea service sat to one side. Apparently some of the ladies had been having a snack when they were called down.

The area around the hole in the center of the floor is empty aside from the rugs, But is soon filled as Hannibal climbs surprisingly gracefully over the railing and stretches out to watch Will get patched up. The other half of the room is curtained off.

“Sleeping area.” Beverly tells him when she sees him looking. “The next two floors up are similar to this. Margot and Alana share this level. Abigail and I are on the next one, then Bedelia on the one after that. Chiyo built herself a little cabin on the west side of the castle. And Hannibal sleeps in the attic. Guess we’ll have to find a place for you.”

Will may sleep with me in the uppermost story. Hannibal says.

Will tenses, casting a wary eye on the dragon who was still watching him intently. The women exchange looks.

“As you say.” Bedelia sits down at the table and takes a sip from one of the cups. Abigail comes down from the upstairs carrying clothing. She sets it down in one of the chairs then scurries back around Hannibal’s bulk.

“You may change in our sleeping area.” Margot says. “There is a wash basin.”

Will nods his thanks and picks up the bundle. He is overly aware of everyone’s eyes on him as he edges around the room. He finds the seam of the curtains and steps through.

He sags in the relative privacy and tries to comes to grips with the series of events. He spots the wash basin and methodically begins to remove his old clothes and clean up.

So he is stuck in a castle with seven women and a dragon. Well, things could be worse. He was still alive, so that's always good. The ladies seem well cared for, though he'd have to talk to them a bit more to confirm this. And he was expected to share a room with the dragon.

He missed his dogs.

He puts on stockings, breeches, a tunic, a leather surcoat, and leather boots. The materials were all much finer than he had worn before. He washes his face, noting a sting on his cheek were he had caught a blow, then he steps back out from behind the curtained area.

A whispered conversation cuts off. Beverly grins at him. "Hungry? We've got some fruit and bread. And tea, of course."

"Thank you." He sits down at the table, and picks up a berry from the bowl. Alana pours him a cup of tea.

"Where does the food come from?" He hadn't paid that much attention when they were flying, but he didn't think there was a town or village nearby.

"We grow some of it, forage for others. And there's a cow and hens in the stables. Chiyo is an avid hunter so we never want for fresh meat. Anything else Hannibal picks up on his flights."

Will refrained from asking how Hannibal managed that. He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"So none of you ever leave?"

Hannibal makes a low growling noise. The women exchange nervous glances.

“Hannibal...worries, if we wander too far from the castle. Alana says.

Will looks at the dragon, lying at ease on its left flank, resting its head on its forelegs. It blinks slowly at Will when he meets its gaze.

You are safe here. I know exactly where you are, and where I can always find you.

It wasn’t a hugely comforting statement to Will, but he got the message. They were, for all intents and purposes, captives.

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